

The Queen Mother of the West in Late Chosŏn Painting

Nelly Georgieva-Russ

Introduction

The influence of Daoism on shaping the Korean cultural heritage and mindscape has been much underestimated, compared to Buddhism and Confucianism. The reason can be found in the fact that, except for a few decades of the late period of the Koguryŏ kingdom (37 BCE - 668 CE), Daoism has never been institutionalized into a full-fledged religious sect with its own priests and places of worship, and existed in the amorphous state of scattered beliefs, poetic images and divination practices. Therefore, scholars mainly talk about Daoist philosophical or religious influence rather than Daoist religious tradition in Korea. This has seriously hindered studies on Korean Daoism both in Korea and the West, in spite of the fact that knowledge of Daoist thought and interest in its divination and physical training practices permeate all Korean dynasties. Another reason is the harsh critique of Daoism by Chosŏn Neo-Confucian establishment that saw in it harmful superstitions and excessive cult incompatible with the clear logic of the Neo-Confucian mindset. This critic led to the ultimate ban of ceremonial Daoism in the Mid-Chosŏn period. Nevertheless, its disciplinary and popular aspects enjoyed great popularity among representatives of various social strata, including not a few Confucian intellectuals, and formed influential subcultures within the Confucian socio-cultural milieu of the Chosŏn state¹.

Korean scholars point to several main reasons of the lack of institutionalization of Korean Daoism, such as: the intolerance of Koryŏ and Chosŏn courts towards Daoism²; blending of Daoism with Shamanism that reduced the need to establish a separate Daoist sect and led to its association with folk beliefs; and most important - the absence of the need to import and adopt beliefs that have already existed as native on the Korean peninsula. The last is related to the controversial issue about the origins of Korean Daoism that has given rise to a debate, where the Korean scholars express the prevalent view of the local origins of *Sŏndo* – the way of the mountain immortals, in native Shamanism³ and some non-Korean scholars - about its roots in Chinese internal alchemy.

¹ Among famous scholars who wrote on *naedan* (inner alchemy) techniques and prose or poetry on Daoist subjects can be mentioned Kim Sisŭp (1425-1493), Chŏng Nyŏm (1506-1549), Yi Yulgok (1536-1584), Han Muwae (1571-1610), Kwon Kŭgchung (1585-1659), Kang Hŏnggyu (1797-1860), Hong Yusŏn, Pak Sŏgye, Han Nandang, Hong Yŏnch'ŏn, Sŏ Myŏngŭng etc.

² It must be nevertheless mentioned that, although not as official ideology, Daoism flourished during the Koryŏ Dynasty (935-1392) and exerted great influence on Koryŏ society both on the level of official state ceremonies praying for the safety of the nation, and of common populace, where it mostly functioned as a happiness-praying religion. The active patronage of Daoism by the king and Koryŏ nobility has led to the exceptional importance and active performance of Daoist rituals at the court.

Daoism seems to have enjoyed particular popularity during the reign of the Koryŏ King Yejong (1105-1122). Hsu Ching (1091-1153) of Sung China has left evidence about the constant support of Daoism by the King who constructed the Pogwŏn Daoist temple to receive Chinese Daoist priests and ensured a regular supply with Daoist literature from Sung China (Kao-li t'u-ching 18:93, cited in Lee: 1997, pp. 249-250).

³ The prevailing view of Korean scholars is that Daoism existed in Koguryŏ long before its official introduction in 624, as part of the Korean primal religion. As parts of it are seen Sindo (神道) – belief in Spirits, and Sŏndo (仙道) – Belief in Immortals, forms of which are Mountains worship (Sanaksunbae 山岳崇拜), and Immortals belief (Sinsŏnsasang 神仙思想). The myth of Tangun, who is said to have lived for 1908 years and finally become an immortal, and the myth of Chumong are interpreted as main evidence of Daoist beliefs prior to the introduction of institutionalized Daoism of Chinese type to Koguryŏ.

The marginal position of Daoism in the Chosŏn period requires a specific approach to its study and use of unconventional primary sources. Being a type of subculture, it is hardly traceable through official Confucian chronicles of the Chosŏn Dynasty on which Korean historiography heavily relies. It has been already pointed out that Korean Daoist heritage should be researched through alternative sources, such as unofficial accounts and anecdotal biographies, local histories, popular essays, and the first attempts in this direction have been made⁴.

Korean Daoism is particularly well articulated also in poetry and painting, where Daoist imagery is abundant. A whole trend in Korean literature originates in Daoism – the poetry of the so called “transcendental seclusionism”, a branch of the literature of seclusion⁵.

The present paper will focus on painting as an essential aspect of the material culture related to Daoism. Some of the great Korean painters of the Chosŏn dynasty⁶ have worked in the genre of *Sinsŏndo* – images of Daoist immortals, and considerable number of such paintings is extant today. This fact, as well as the broad presence and active use of Daoist imagery in the Chosŏn royal palace⁷, requires a redefinition of the place in the Chosŏn society of these beliefs, officially regarded as marginal and even heretical, and of their artistic expression.

The paper aims to present one of the central subjects within the Daoist Figure Painting genre – the Banquet at the Abode of Xiwangmu, the Queen Mother of the West, to trace its iconographical versions and their development within and out of the influence of the Chinese iconography, as well as to look for the ways in which these paintings were used and perceived during the Chosŏn dynasty.

Literary Background

Although the earliest extant Korean paintings of the Banquet at the Abode of Xiwangmu (Kor. *Yojiyŏndo* 瑤池宴圖) date from the late 17th century, the story of Xiwangmu and the banquet at the Emerald pond at her abode entered Korean literature during the Unified Silla Dynasty, under the influence of the Tang. Choi Ja (1186-1241) has left a record in *Bo Han Jip* (補閑集) testifying that the ancient story of Xiwangmu was a poetic theme of the state examination (Yi: 1996). The story of the Queen Mother of the West appears to have excited Korean intellectuals’ imagination through the centuries since we find a vivid description of her Jade palace in 16th century, in the poetry of Hŏ Nansŏlhŏn⁸. Similarly to the motif of the Jade Emperor (*Okwangsangje*) in Kim Sisŏp poetry, the vision of the abode of the Queen Mother of the West pervades many of her poetic works. In “*Yusŏnsa*” (Song of Immortals at Play) she sees herself freely roaming the fantastic world of Xiwangmu guided by a blue bird, or a heavenly lady⁹.

⁴ For example, the presentation of John Goulde “Taoist Alchemists in Mid-Chosŏn Korea” on the AAS conference in 1995

⁵ Chosŏn escapist poetry is rich with immortals imagery. Compilations dealing with Daoist themes were often called *Sŏndo* (The Way of the Immortals), as the one in *Maewŏltangjip* by Kim Si-Sŏp (1425-1493), or *Sŏndo* of the woman-poet Hŏ Nansŏlhŏn (1563-1589).

⁶ Such as Kim Myŏngguk, Jŏng Sŏn, Kim Hongdo, Sim Sajŏng, Jang Sŏngŏp etc.

⁷ The palace was densely decorated with Daoist images called to symbolically elevate and sanctify the royal space by imparting to it the balance of the cosmic energies yin and yang, as well as with abundant auspicious imagery.

⁸ Nansŏlhŏn has left a number of poems with outright Daoist contents – “*Pohŏsa*”, “*Yusŏnsa*” and “*Paegongnu sangnyangmun*”. She imparted to Daoism deep and dramatic existential meaning – it became her refuge from the grim Confucian reality, the only place where, as a woman, she could obtain freedom.

⁹ I said goodbye to King Mu at the thousand-year old lake Yao.
Letting the blue bird fly before me I looked for Liu Lang.
When the day broke I heard music coming from the Upper World.
The waiting ladies followed astride the white phoenix.

.....
Astride a whale, Yi Taibai bows to *baiyujing*.

As painting subject, the Banquet at the Abode of Xiwangmu was imported from the Ming Dynasty during the Late Chosŏn Period. The earliest Korean record referring to such paintings is an annotation of King Sukjong (1674-1720) in the ninth volume of “Yŏlsŏngŏjae” with the title “Jaeyojitaehwaedo 題瑤池大會圖” (first introduced by Yi Hyŏnsu). This record is even more important as it refers to a concrete painting of the Xiwangmu Banquet and, being written by king’s hand shows the appreciation of the king himself. In spite of its Chinese origin and specifically Chinese legendary characters, the subject took its own independent path of development on Korean soil following Korean cultural environment, local tastes and specific uses. It became imbued with strong flair of “Koreanness” and produced an independent iconographical version.

The earliest Chinese records with the name of Xiwangmu occur on oracle bone inscriptions with prognostications from the Shang Dynasty¹⁰. She is described in detail in *Shan Hai Jing* (Classic of Mountains and Seas)¹¹, in a section called “Classic of Western Mountains” as therianthrope deity who resembles a human with leopard’s tail and tiger’s teeth¹², lives in the Jade Mountain far away to the west¹³, is good at whistling¹⁴ and wears a head ornament – a jade *sheng*, in her disheveled hair¹⁵ (*Shan Hai Jing*, 2.19a). The *sheng* is found in all early representations of the goddess in Han Dynasty funerary art as her most fixed attribute¹⁶. Thus, the earliest hypostasis of Xiwangmu appears as that of a mountain shamanist deity, goddess of the west, presiding over the death and afterlife and controlling the cosmic forces of creation and destruction.¹⁷

Xiwangmu connection with the Dao is found in the Inner Chapters of *Zhuangzi*, ca. 300 BCE, where she is described as a woman who attained the Dao but no one knows her origin or her ending (James: 1995). According to Fracasso’ categorization of texts related to Xiwangmu, *Shan Hai Jing* and *Zhuangzi* represent respectively the southwestern (describing her in animalistic and shamanistic terms, as celestial being) and the southern (describing her as an ancient Daoist personage) traditions (Fracasso: 1988). But there exists also a northern tradition represented by *Mu Tianzi Zhuan* (The Story of King Mu, the Son of Heaven) (5th - 4th century BCE) - a narrative from the late Zhou period about the travel of King Mu of Zhou to the west¹⁸, where she is described as a queen, the ruler of a land on Kunlun Mountain - the

Xiwangmu welcomes him and holds a party at the blue castle in his honor.

As he lifts a painting brush and begins to write the character yu (玉)

His wine-flushed face looks as if he were presenting the *ch’ŏngp’ŏngjo* at the royal party.

¹⁰ The inscription reads “...we divined: If we make offering to the Eastern Mother and the Western Mother, there will be approval” (Cahill: 1995, p.12). Cahill places her as the goddess of the west, one of the several female divinities of the five cosmic mountains marking the five directions of the world, and of the paradises in east and west, where immortals were believed to dwell (Cahill: 1995, p.16).

¹¹ An imaginative geography from the 4th century BC containing descriptions of spirits and weird beings, inhabiting China’s mountains and rivers. Later *Shan Hai Jing* became part of the Daoist canon.

¹² Cahill draws a parallel between this description of the goddess and the costume worn by Chinese shamans, indicating her strong shamanic nature. The tiger as the guardian animal of the west is Xiwangmu familiar in later representations, but here it is one of her physical features (Cahill: 1995, p.16-17).

¹³ Jade is the symbol of indestructibility and eternal life. Other texts place her abode in the Kunlun Mountain instead.

¹⁴ The whistling skills signify to Daoists a realized person who has attained breath control and communication with the spirits (Cahill: 1995, p.16).

¹⁵ The disheveled hair is seen as resulting from the ecstatic communion of the shaman with the spirits. Cahill suggests that the motif of the *sheng*, traditionally associated with the brake mechanism of the loom, indicates Xiwangmu as the cosmic weaver, who creates and maintains the universe (Ibid.).

¹⁶ Representations of Xiwangmu are found in many tombs in Henan, Nanyang, Shandong and Sichuan.

¹⁷ West is traditionally associated with the Land of the Dead. Earliest representations of the goddess are found in only mortuary context.

¹⁸ This is the first known travel literature on the Silk Road. *Mu Tianzi Zhuan* tells of King Mu journey to the Tarim basin, the Pamir Mountains and further into today’s Iran region, where the legendary meeting with Xiwangmu has taken place. The book is lost but is referenced in *Shan Hai Jin*.

terminal point of his travel, and entertained him in her palace (Yu: 2010)¹⁹. King Mu is said to have invited Xiwangmu to a banquet at the Emerald Pond²⁰, engraved a record of his visit on the rocks of Mount Yan, planted a memorial tree of sophora and named the place “the Mount of the Queen Mother of the West” (Yu: 2010, p.35). It is this story and not the earliest iconography of the goddess in Han funerary art - as a supreme deity presiding among her mythical animals²¹- that is illustrated in the paintings of the Banquet at the Abode of Xiwangmu, which were introduced from Ming China to Chosŏn.

The peaches of immortality that ripen once in three thousand years and were believed to confer immortality to those who ate them are one of the goddess immanent features. The first association of Xiwangmu abode on Mount Kunlun with the peaches is found in *Bowu zhi* (Monograph on Broad Phenomena) by Zhang Hua (232-300). The story relates about the Xiwangmu visit to Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (r. 140-87 BCE) in 110 BCE.²² During her visit the goddess presented five peaches to the emperor. When he tried to save the seeds for planting, she said that they would not bear fruit for 3000 years (Little: 2000, p.159). In painting, the two stories – in *Mu Tianzi Zhuan* and *Bowu zhi*, divided in time by almost eight centuries, were merged in one iconographical subject and the banquet thrown at the Emerald Pond by King Mu during his travel to the west became associated with the festival celebrating every 3000 years the periodic blossoming of the peaches of immortality. A host of immortals arrive at the invitation of Xiwangmu to honor this event.

This precisely is the subject of the paintings in question. Although it takes its primary origins in these two ancient texts, the story obtained popularity both in painting and literature thanks to Yuan Dynasty comedies²³ and Ming and Qing theatrical plays and Immortals novels. Chu Yu-tun (1378-1437) - a significant playwright of the early Ming Dynasty, exerted particular influence on the rising popularity of the story and, thus, on its painted versions. He has composed a number of plays on the Peach Festival, one of which – *Gunsŏn Gyŏngsu Bandoehwae* (Immortals at the Peach Festival), was performed at the birthday banquet of Emperor Ming Taizu²⁴. Such plays were performed at birthday occasions and banquets as wish for happiness and long life. In mid Yuan Dynasty, painting and tapestry with the same content came into vogue and presenting such work on a birthday occasion was laden with the same meaning as performing the play – a wish for blissful, happy and long life.

The popular novels from the Ming Dynasty “Journey to the East” by Wu Yuan Tai (1522-1573) where the immortals gathering at the abode of Xiwangmu in the Kunlun Mountain is described in detail, and *Sinsŏn T’onggam*²⁵ exerted also significant influence on popularizing the story. Yuan and Ming theater plays were not much in vogue in Chosŏn, but Ming novels, particularly “Journey to the West” were

¹⁹ Yu supposes that the prototype of Xiwangmu is Cybele, the Earth Mother in the Mediterranean, and sees her as part of the influence of the Mediterranean culture on Chinese mythology (Yu: 2010, p. 13).

²⁰ Supposedly lake Zaysan near Mount Yanzi

²¹ Companions of Xiwangmu in Han funerary art are a toad, a hare with mortar and a pestle, a nine-tailed fox, sometimes winged *xian* – men who have attained immortality, and devotees.

²² Xiwangmu sent a white deer – an animal symbolizing immortality – to the emperor to inform him of her advent and arrived on the festival of Double Sevens, riding on a chariot of purple clouds and clothed in seven layers of blue clouds (Cahill:1995, p.48-55).

²³ Yuan Dynasty texts of comedies about the Kunlun peach festival are not extant, but their titles are sufficient to know the subject: Ban Do Hwae, 蟠桃會 (Peaches of Immortality Gathering), Chungsinsŏn Kyŏngsang Bandoehwae, 衆神仙慶賞蟠桃會 (Peaches of immortality gathering with a crowd of immortals praising the auspicious event), Sŏwangmo Ch’uksu Yojihwae, 西王母祝壽瑤池會 (Gathering at the Jade Pond to honor Xiwangmu), Ch’uksŏngsu Kŭmmo Hŏn Ban Do, 祝聖壽金母獻蟠桃 (Peaches of immortality gathering to congratulate the metal mother) etc. (Chao Ching-shen, *An Analysis of the Eight Immortals in Literature*, Echo of Things Chinese, Taipei, 1975, p.72, cited in: Park Eunsun: 1987, p.47.)

²⁴ Other Chu Yu-tun plays on the same subject are Yoji P’alsŏn Gyŏnsu 瑤池八仙慶壽 (The Eight Immortals celebrating at the Jade Pond), Poknok Susŏn Gungyŏnghwae 福祿壽仙宮慶會 (Auspicious gathering of immortals) etc. (Ibid.)

²⁵ An Encyclopedia of Chinese mythology.

widely read and strongly influenced the development of a Korean iconography of the Peach Festival scene.

Style and Composition of Korean *Yojiyōndo*

About thirty *Yojiyōndo* are presently extant from the Chosŏn period and presumably more will be discovered in the future. Except for the uncertain dating of two of them as from the 17th century²⁶, they come from the 18th (about one third of the extant works), 19th (about two thirds) and early 20th century (one example), maintaining similar iconographical scheme, although revealing certain variations within it. According to the subject, “The Banquet at the Abode of Xiwangmu” belongs to the genre of *Sinsōndo* (Paintings of Daoist Immortals) and until the 1990-ies was traditionally classified as folk painting. But as a result of the growing interest and research on the arts of the royal palace in the 1990-ies, it was revealed that these paintings were actively used at the palace and came to be researched also in the context of the royal court, as court painting²⁷.

Yojiyōndo from the 18-19th century demonstrate a repetitive composition, style and a fixed iconographical scheme, typical for religious and ritual painting, and, as a rule, are executed in the screen format. The difference in the format between Chinese and Korean paintings suggests their different use. While Chinese representations of the Xiwangmu Banquet are mounted as hand scrolls or hanging scrolls, thus pointing to their perception as paintings for appreciation, where the subject of the painting is important in itself and self-sufficient, the format and size of Korean *Yojiyōndo* speak of their ritualistic use as part of a symbolic event – a birthday banquet, anniversary or wedding. The importance of these paintings in royal context is hard to underestimate. The inscriptions on two paintings reveal that they were created on important occasions at the palace – one was celebrating the investiture of the Crown prince and the other – the birth of a heir-apparent to King Sunmyo²⁸. Apart from this, court music called *Hōn Sōndo* (獻仙桃) and a related dance – Hondo-t’ak (獻桃卓) were performed at banquets that were given at the Chosŏn court²⁹. The banquet was thus sanctified, the guests being likened to the immortals attending Xiwangmu feast and the royal palace - equated with the Jade palace of the Queen Mother of the West.

The fixed composition and the combination of archaic blue-and-green painting style with the *tanch’ōng* five-color palette place Korean *Yojiyōndo* in a row with other symbolic paintings of auspicious content that commonly decorated the royal palace - Ten Longevity Symbols, *Sipjangsaengdo*, Sun, Moon and the Five Peaks, *Ilwōl-oakdo* etc. The blue-and-green painting technique refers to a legendary event from the ancient past in an imaginary landscape³⁰ while the combination of red, yellow, blue, black and white in *tanch’ōng*, universally used also in Korean Buddhist temples, achieves both a high decorative and symbolical effect being charged with Daoist Yin-Yang and Five Elements symbolism.

Typical for Korean *Yojiyōndo* is an eight-panel composition combining two scenes - six panels occupied by the scene of the banquet centered around the two main characters of Xiwangmu and King Mu of Zhou, and three panels showing the arrival of the Daoist immortals, flocking to the banquet to celebrate the Peach Festival. The immortals are depicted floating on the waves, or descending from the sky, holding their specific attributes or riding on them.

²⁶ One in the National Museum of Korea, the other – in Jōng Haesōk private collection, Seoul

²⁷ Pioneer studies on the topic are the articles of Park Eunsun in the journals *Kogomisul* and *Misulsayōngu* and the MA thesis of Yi Hyōnsu

²⁸ Wangsaeja Ch’aegrye Kyaebyōng, 王世子冊禮契屏 (A screen painting for the investiture ritual of the Crown Prince) in the collection of Ming Byōngdu, Seoul, dated to 1800, and Sunmyojo WangsaejaT’angang Kyaebyōng, 王世子誕降契屏 (A screen painting celebrating the birth of a heir apparent to King Sunmyo) from 1812 in a private collection.

²⁹ The first record about Hon Sōndo music and dance is found in Koryōsa.

³⁰ As an antithesis, contemporary Korean true-view landscape was executed in ink, or light colors and ink, in the style of Southern School literati painting.

There is a clear difference between *Yojiyōndo* following the style and iconography of Ming and Qing paintings and *Yojiyōndo* that can be defined as typically Korean. Representative of the latter in its mature form is the 19th century *Yojiyōndo* from the collection of the Kyōnggi-do Provincial Museum (fig.1). It is characterized by a symmetrical composition where the two subjects – the Banquet of Xiwangmu and the Immortals on Waves – are treated with the same importance, instilling the impression that two independent painting subjects were combined in one. The banquet scene, called *Ban Do Hwae*, takes place on the Jade terrace of Xiwangmu palace on the Kunlun Mountain and is enclosed between the first and the sixth panel. The immortal Sosōngong on his deer and Laozi on his one-horn cow are approaching the event from the opposite sides and their figures play important compositional role by marking the two edges of the scene. The steep rocks in the blue-and-green manner on the foreground, the left edge of the Jade terrace fringed with clouds and towering above the ocean waves, and the dense clouds hovering low over the terrace enhance the effect of enclosing the enchanted realm of the palace and isolating it from the mundane world. Beside the traditional auspicious symbolism of the clouds they also have a textual foundation – according to the legend, when Xiwangmu enfolded the trigram (*gwae*) that King Mu presented to her, the whole palace was filled with thick odorous fog. The peach trees along with the horses and the cart of King Mu are depicted deeply immersed in clouds.

The main scene of the banquet has a pronounced circle composition centering on Xiwangmu and her guest King Mu, sitting at tables richly laden with peaches and cups with elixir of immortality. Both are marked by painted screens with imaginary landscapes and deferentially attended by a retinue of heavenly ladies, the Jade Maidens - companions of the goddess on Kunlun and her messengers. Two groups of maidens playing various instruments are arranged to close the circle composition, at the center of which two long-sleeved Jade maidens perform a dance together with two giant phoenixes – the symbolic animal of Xiwangmu and symbol of *yin*. Stormy waves of repetitive schematic pattern surge beyond the terrace serving as background for the second scene – Immortals on their way to Xiwangmu Banquet. The individuality of each immortal is identifiable through his attributes and fixed iconographical features originating from his legend. The Eight Immortals (Lu Dongbin, Han Xiang Zi, Zhang Guo Lao, Han Zhongli, Li Tieguai, Lan Caihe, Cao Guojiu, He Xiangu) form the core of the immortals host while the Old Man of the South Pole (Su No-in) riding a crane and Buddha surrounded by the Four Heavenly Kings floating on a cloud, are descending from the sky.

One of the earliest extant examples of *Yojiyōndo* suggests the initial phase of this iconography (fig.2). This, supposedly 17th century painting, centers on the scene of the banquet and the typical for Korean *Yojiyōndo* merging of the two subjects is absent. The waves of dry linear pattern, occupying half of the screen on the right side and dominated by symbolic depictions of the Sun and Moon, very similar to those in *Ilwōl-oakdo*, are almost devoid of figures of immortals. Only two unknown female immortals on the far right and Kwaesōng riding dragon are visible. This painting can be considered as the early phase in the formation of Korean *Yojiyōndo* iconography.

Apart from the first type of *Yojiyōndo* introduced above, two more variations are discernible. While preserving the general disposition of the characters, they demonstrate somewhat different spatial arrangement. The painting in the collection of Peabody Essex Museum is a good illustration of the second *Yojiyōndo* type (fig.3). The screen is equally divided between the banquet scene and the Immortals on Waves, each of the subjects occupying four panels. The Xiwangmu abode is framed with steep green rocks of peculiar diagonal form and tall pine-trees, achieving the effect of theater drapes. These landscape elements are arranged around an imaginary axis and form oval space cells which separate the central scene of the banquet from the Jade palace setting with its architectural details, coachmen, cart with horses and palace ladies preparing for the feast. The Immortals on Waves scene is expanded compared to the first type, and the number of the depicted immortals is visibly enlarged.

In the third type, represented by only two works³¹, the characters are traditionally arranged and depicted according their representation canon but are placed in visibly narrowed and flattened spatial plane. Some

³¹ One is in the National Museum of Korea, the other – in a private collection.

details of the palace setting are abridged and the size of the figures is noticeably enlarged – a feature manifesting the general attention in Korean Peach Festival paintings to the individual features of the characters.

The particular qualities of Korean *Yojiyŏndo* will become more evident after some excursion on the Chinese iconography of the subject.

Chinese *Ban Do Hwae* Paintings

The earliest known depiction of the Banquet at the Abode of Xiwangmu in Chinese painting (normally called *Ban Do Hwae*, 蟠桃會), preserved in a Qing Dynasty copy, is a work of Fang Chunnian (1225-1264) – a painter from the Southern Song imperial painting academy (fig.4). This work demonstrates what later will become a key feature of the Chinese Peach Festival iconography – the accent on architecture as a powerful means to suggest an enchanted realm of paradisiacal quality as is the abode of Xiwangmu. A sumptuous palace with a broad terrace amidst majestic blue-and-green mountains and a sea of clouds represents the goddess's Jade Tower. Its grandeur is enhanced by the tiny size of the figures of the palace women and immortals attending the banquet, none of whom can be identified. Some Yuan paintings, such as Mu Gwang's "The Palace on the Mountain of the Immortals" demonstrate similar approach: an assembly of immortals depicted as miniature figures gathered on the terrace of a lofty palace, celebrating the Peach Festival (fig.5). In these paintings the depiction of the immortals world at a greater scale is given higher importance than the representation of the banquet event and related to it details.

This earlier type is however only distantly related to Korean *Yojiyŏndo*. There is another line of development traceable from the Ming Dynasty, and probably strongly influenced by theatrical plays on the same theme, that is more closely related to Korean paintings. A work by Ch'iu Ying (ca.1494-1552) represents the Banquet scene on a high three-storied terrace with its steep staircase immersed in the raging waves. Unlike earlier versions, the figure of Xiwangmu on her throne is distinctly visible, while the immortals attending the banquet are still shown unindividualized, as a multitude without specific features. As in Korean paintings, the waves occupy a significant part of the painting surface, but immortals have already arrived at the Jade terrace. Another painting by the same artist – a long handscroll – shows the Jade terrace with the clearly visible figures of Xiwangmu and King Mu, attended by palace ladies, amidst a magnificent vista of boundless mountain ranges. The figures of the immortals are again of a tiny size but the immortals are shown floating on waves, similarly to Korean *Yojoyŏndo*. A work by unknown author from the Ming Dynasty shows the banquet on a terrace among high mountains with larger figures and discernible facial features of the goddess and King Mu (fig.6). They are both sitting on thrones, surrounded by palace ladies. The scene is treated rather as an audience than as a festive event and all characters are individualized – a new feature in the subject's iconography.

Thus, one can summarize the main differences between Korean and Chinese paintings of the Banquet at the Abode of Xiwangmu, as follows: 1. Chinese paintings place emphasis on the representation of the Immortals world and the accent is put on the dreamlike quality of the vision rendered by majestic architectural constructions and magnificent natural setting of the festival; Korean paintings concentrate on the scene of the banquet, inserting many details of the event, such as the dance of the Jade maidens with the phoenixes and groups of maidens performing music, the scene of the palace ladies preparing the peaches and the elixir of immortality for the feast; the cart and the horses of King Mu etc. 2. Chinese paintings rarely include the scene of the immortals floating on the waves on their way to the banquet – even if the waves are depicted, the immortals have already arrived at the Jade palace; The scene of the immortals on their way to the banquet, floating on the waves or descending from the air, are essential part of Korean paintings and occupies a significant part of the screen. 3. Immortals figures in Chinese paintings are small-sized, unindividualized and represented as an assembly; in Korean *Yojiyŏndo* immortals are identifiable – they are depicted in large size, with their specific attributes and features corresponding to their legend. 4. Chinese paintings are mounted as a hanging scroll or handscroll; Korean

paintings are executed as painted screens. Both tend to the blue-and-green landscape style as a way to picture the fantastic setting of a legendary event.

A Korean *Yojiyŏndo* following the Chinese manner is extant and once more illustrates the dissemblance between the two types. A hanging scroll from the collection of the National Museum of Korea portrays the scene on the Jade Terrace as an audience rather than as a festival (fig.8). The vertical cliff, again reminiscent of a theater drape and the two-storied terrace hovering above the waves at its bottom, form a steep diagonal redoubled by the diagonals of the treetops and the retinue of the King. As a result, a vast space is skillfully rendered in a vertical composition. Unlike Korean-style paintings, the scene of the gathering is small scaled and immortals floating on waves are not depicted.

Except the above mentioned characteristics of the Korean version of the Peach festival paintings, one more should be pointed out. Among the holy multitude arriving at the event, Buddha and the Four Heavenly Kings are depicted along with the Daoist immortals while their images are not found in Chinese *Ban Do Hwae*. Yi Hyŏnsu has suggested a literary basis of this detail in the Ming Dynasty novel “Journey to the West”. In the fifth chapter, Buddha is mentioned among the immortals, deities, bodhisattvas and various celestial beings who are traditionally invited to the banquet³².

Conclusion

Korean iconography of the Banquet at the Abode of Xiwangmu demonstrates a number of peculiarities, not found in Chinese paintings on the same subject. These include different approach to the size and individual features of the depicted characters, different spatial arrangement and special emphasis on the Immortals on Waves scene.

The variable size, format and composition of Chinese Peach Festival representations, on the one side, and the fixed format and iconography of Korean works, on the other, demonstrate the essential difference in the perception of this theme in China and Korea, and its different use. While Chinese paintings were created for appreciation, or given as a birthday or anniversary present for bliss and long life, Korean paintings were used in ritual occasions and court events, symbolically elevating and sanctifying these events by leveling them to the event at the Jade palace.

The reason for the importance of the Immortals on Waves scene within Korean Peach festival paintings is an issue for further research. *P’asang-gunsŏndo* (Immortals on Waves) enjoyed favor as an independent subject and often took the format of a screen. The question stays whether this subject existed separately and was subsequently merged with the Banquet scene, or it rather owes its origination to *Yojiyŏndo* paintings from which it later gemmated.

In the Late Chosŏn period Koreans removed their gaze from China as cultural model and turned to their own native heritage. This was the time when popular Daoism grew strong and influential, unlike early and mid-Chosŏn period, and brought about unprecedented popularity of images of immortals, including the Xiwangmu theme. The increased popularity of paintings of outright Daoist content, like *Yojiyŏndo* and *P’asang-gunsŏndo*, makes it possible to infer that the immortals theme was imagined more as a part of the native artistic tradition of *Sindo*, than as one imported from China.

³² Journey to the West, p.65

Bibliography

Cahill, Suzanne, *Transcendence and Divine Passion: The Queen Mother of the West in Medieval China*, California: Stanford University Press, 1995

Fracasso, Riccardo. Holy Mothers of Ancient China: A New Approach to the Hsiwangmu Problem, *T'oung Pao* LXXIV (1988), pp.1-46

Wu Cheng'en, transl. by W.J.F. Jenner, *Journey to the West*, Foreign Languages Press, 2003

Park Eunsun. Jǒngmyojo <Wangsaeja Ch'aegrye Kyaebyǒng>: Sinsǒndo Kyaebyǒng –ŭi hangaji yae (A screen painting for the investiture of the Crown Prince of King Jongmyo: An example of Immortals screen painting), *Misulsayǒngu* 4, 1990, pp.101-112

Park Eunsun. Sunmyojo <Wangsaeja T'angang Kyaebyǒng>-ae taehan tosangjǒk koch'al (Iconographic research on the screen painting celebrating the birth of a heir apparent to King Sunmyo), *Kogomisul* 174, 1987, pp.40-75

Schipper, Kristofer, *The Taoist Body*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993

Stephen Little, ed. *Taoism and the Arts of China*, Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2000

The Classic of Mountains and Seas, transl. by Anne Birrell, Penguin Books, 1999

Yi Hyǒnsu, *Chosǒn hugi yojiyǒndo-ae taehan yǒngu* (A Study of Daoist Immortals on their Way to Xiwangmu Banquet of the Chosǒn Dynasty), MA thesis, Ewha Women's University, 1996

Yu Taishan, The Communication Lines between East and West as seen in the Mu Tianzi Zhuan, *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 197 (January, 2010), pp. 1-57

Plates



Fig. 1. The Banquet at the Abode of Xiwangmu, 19th century, Kyönggi-do Provincial Museum



Fig. 2. The Banquet at the Abode of Xiwangmu, 17th century (?), Jöng Haesök Collection



Fig. 3. The Banquet at the Abode of Xiwangmu, 19th century, Peabody Essex Museum



Fig.4. After Fang Chunnian (1225-1264), The Peach Festival of the Queen Mother of the West, Qing Dynasty copy



Fig.5. Mu Gwang, The Palace on the Mountain of the Immortals, Yuan Dynasty



Fig.6. Ch'iu Ying (ca.1494-1552), The Peach Festival at the Abode of Xiwangmu, Ming Dynasty



Fig.7. Unknown author, The Banquet at the Abode of Xiwangmu, Ming Dynasty



Fig. 8. The Banquet at the Abode of Xiwangmu, Late Chosŏn Dynasty, National Museum of Korea